"Never mind," Clement said impatiently. "Is Beth all right?"

"We weren't hurt. Your hands are raw. Can you move your fingers?"

Clement focused on T'serek helping Sundersun up from where she had ignominiously lost her iron rations. "He's hurting her." Near hysteria raised his voice.

"All right, I'll see to it," Nadia soothed. His hand had clenched into a fist so she supposed he had the use of it. Spock, searching in the rubble, had evidently heard no other signs of life and as he came back to the Speaker, he held the light parallel to the floor. It caught T'serek's face taking in the full import of the explosion. His face was streaked with tears from the light that had half blinded him, his eyelashes raying out in dark points, and his face was charged with the emotion he usually kept in check. Sunderson burst into racking sobs and threw herself on his chest.

Clement scrabbled through the rubble and snatched her away.

"Leave her alone or I'll kill you," he hissed.

Sunderson pulled herself free. "You leave me alone! I don't belong to you. Just leave me alone!" She covered her face with her hands.

Nadia's temper blazed, too, even as she cringed away from the floor they stood on. "Control yourselves." She shook the sobbing girl. "Clement, report!"

T'serek turned away from them as if they didn't exist, and Clement's eyes, squid-like in a mask of blood, followed him angrily as he walked away.

"What happened here?" Nadia demanded.

"The Speaker's weapon started to hum like a phaser on overload--there was nothing we could do about it. Then the ceiling came down, like a trap, and I threw the weapon out--"

Clement was still confused and off-balance from the blow to his head. He didn't realize fully what he was saying or what had happened, but Nadia saw it with sickening clarity. She had forgotten about the Speaker's weapon. Spock had hardly been aware when it was first used, but it was an energy device--just what they had been warned against. She remembered what she had seen in the rubble and wanted to vomit like Sunderson. Hillis and Craven. Had Craven known his death was coming? She wanted to strike Clement, beat the knowledge of what he had done into him, but Spock's voice quiet and urgent brought her back to sanity. Clement was a skilled cyberneticist, but he wasn't the metal for a nightmare like this. And it would do no good to tell him so.

"Yes, yes--I'm sorry, Mr. Spock. I didn't hear you."

"Mr. Clement, did you see or hear anything prior to the explosion?"

Clement shook his head, but he looked uncertain. "When we first came down here--I, maybe I hallucinated. I thought I saw an animal."

The Speaker looked up.

"What kind of an animal, Mr. Clement?"

"A wolf," he said reluctantly, "or a man--maybe it was a shadow."

"Did the others see anything?"

"No," Clement said with more certainty. "They thought I had imagined it; that's why they went outside."

At the door, T'serek cursed and slammed his hand into the wall.

"The fault is mine, First Officer." Goren's voice was very weary. "I kept the weapon for myself, in case the Wielda found me."

My fault, thought Nadia. I should have remembered the weapon, not separated the party. Dray's fault for leaving his men to be with Spock, Spock's fault because he's in charge. And none of it matters any more to Hillis and Tom Craven. They won't be making any more jokes or having any more premonitions.

"There is nothing more we can do here," Spock said. "We have five hours remaining."

Since the dress uniform had no collar, Kirk had often wondered about the origin of the expression "tight collar clothes." On V'ei'drei, after wading through the diplomatic crush and attending two banquets, he suddenly equated it with another old Earth term, "ants in your pants," and understood. While he was perfectly willing to ferry any number of Federation personnel to the farther reaches of the galactic lens, and deposit them on planets and places unknown, he did not like to leave his own men behind. He'd been on the figit since his arrival, choking on the polite routine while he wondered what was happening on Ixmahx.

It wasn't that he didn't appreciate the importance of diplomacy. He knew that Meade Morrow had probably contributed more to the stability of the Federation than all the battles his decorations represented. But Meade was the one diplomat in a thousand who had everybody's interests at heart. Most of the cookie crumblers assembled on V'ei'drei were either professional negotiators representing special interest groups for cold cash, or window dressing provided to impress the other side. Like himself. Smile, bow, puff out your chest so they can see your medals. It was almost a relief to hear the beep of his communicator. He retired to a potted palm and flipped it open.

"Kirk."

"Priority message from Sector Command, Captain." Uhura's professional voice. "You are ordered to report to the ship immediately and we have a transporter fix on you." The slightest pause. "Mr. Scott is preparing to leave orbit." Which was one way of saying that five minutes didn't matter either way. Kirk didn't like unnecessary urgency.

"Lock on to these coordinates, Lieutenant. I'll tell them when." He abandonned the potted plant long enough to make his excuses to his hosts and the diplomatic charge d'affairs, whisper his regrets into the ear of a lovely lady with influence to sway decisions either for or against the Federation, and was back aboard the ship in three minutes.

"What is it?" asked McCoy, waiting for him in the transporter room.

"Don't know yet. Trouble. Come on."